

# INSIDE HIGHER ED

## The Health of the English Major

Kent Cartwright examines some of the strengths and weaknesses of the English major and reports that the news is not all bad.

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The Modern Language Association released a substantial [report](#) in recent months on the state of the English major that can provide guidance to departments in light of the unprecedented implosion of [enrollments in humanities](#) at American colleges and universities over the last several years. The report offers a picture of how English departments currently conceive of their discipline and provides a basis for rethinking the major.

As chair of the committee that drafted the report, I have been able to look closely at some of the strengths and weaknesses of the English major. I want to focus here on three topics that grow out of that report: 1) the generativeness of the English program, 2) the curricular problem of literary history and 3) the opportunities for increasing English undergraduate enrollments. The news is not all bad.

### The Richness of English

As we committee members studied programs, we gained a renewed appreciation for the role of the English department in the academy. English stands out as one of the most generative fields in all of higher education. It has been, and continues to be, a wellspring for new approaches, new ideas and new fields -- some of which have become full-fledged disciplines of their own.

An English professor, Carl Bode, launched the first American studies department, at my institution, the University of Maryland. The determination of English departments to teach formerly ignored African American literature helped to spur

the creation of departments of African American studies. English faculty interests have provided vital impetus for the formation of programs in women's studies and comparative literature. Likewise, the English discipline has been instrumental in promoting cultural theory and in bringing cultural studies and postcolonial studies into existence. Similarly, in most institutions, English is where you go to learn about postmodernism.

English departments have thus broadened our engagement with literature and culture and worked at the forefront of the national drive to embrace diversity. Those contributions are reflected in the curricula of English departments across the country, which are rich, varied in approach and intellectually vibrant. Such achievements are possible partly because English departments are typically the largest in the humanities and often involve a mix of enterprises that give them energy. Besides the study of literature, an English department might embrace creative writing, comparative literature, linguistics, rhetoric and composition, theater, communication, new media studies and even courses in biblical literature or in folklore and mythology. English departments are hotbeds of wide-ranging and synergistic enterprises. And they bring with them public-serving events in the form of guest lectures, poetry and fiction readings, conferences, public seminars, discussion groups, and screenings.

Indeed, the English department is at the very heart of the university's cultural community, and its health gives life to everyone in the academy. When an institution such as the University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point, **truncates its English program**, it sounds its own death knell as a vital intellectual institution.

### **The Problem of Literary History**

Notwithstanding the richness and productivity of English, the state of its traditional core curricular element, literary history, presents a problem. This subject merits serious professional attention, because the study of literary history is the most endangered part of the English program -- the place where enrollments have fallen most sharply. Because of intellectual changes, this aspect of the curriculum has become less coherent.

Virtually every English major that we studied obliges students to fulfill historical requirements. They are fundamental to the major, they cultivate historical consciousness and they help to build a common knowledge base for students.

Such requirements might take the form of mandatory, broad survey courses within periods, such as Medieval and Renaissance Literature, or of student-chosen distribution courses like Shakespeare: Histories and Tragedies, selected from varied offerings listed under different historical periods. Those two formats, which together account for almost every English major program, group courses according to our understandings of literary and cultural periods.

Of course, literary and cultural periods are always under scrutiny and subject to revision; that is part of their interest and vitality. The medieval period, for some scholars, now runs deep into the 16th century, and we now might speak of the “long” 18th century or the “long” 19th century. Terms such as “Renaissance” are replaced by some with “early modern.” Other terms, such as “baroque” and even “Enlightenment,” have fallen away in course titles. Debates on such matters tell us that literature and culture have a history, that such a history runs roughly parallel to but not in lockstep with political and social history, and that the ferment about periods reflects their liveliness as topics. That history also entails study of changes over time in matters such as genre, figuration and language, while it enables intertextual study as well as the study of periodization itself.

But a different kind of history has also developed within that framework: contextual history -- that is, the study of the relationship between a literary work and its immediate political, social and physical environment. Here the dynamics of an early 16th-century play might be understood as addressing the politics of the court of Henry VIII at a particular moment. Or the rhythm of some 19th-century poetry might be examined in relation to developments in the mechanics of motion, such as the railroad. This form of historical study -- often identified as cultural history or cultural studies -- reflects the pervasive New Historicist movement and its significant insistence that literature is relevant to both political and everyday life.

Although the boundary between these two types of history is permeable, one emphasizes literature’s own past and development while the other emphasizes literature’s engagement with the world around it. One history is internal, and the other is external -- with the pluses and minuses that go with them. While both those approaches are valid, the problem for the English major is that requirements are constructed typically according to the first approach but

practiced according to the second. Thus, a course used to satisfy a distribution requirement in medieval and Renaissance literature might be about, say, monsters -- why societies create them, how they are imagined, what purposes they serve. That sounds like a great course (I'd like to take it), but it can remain unclear what the course has to do with a particular period requirement and why a student is obliged to take it or something similar.

Thus, we have a historical requirement, but we do not know exactly what it is or why it exists. Nowhere did the committee see a course in *What Is Literary History?* or *Why Study Literature in Its Historical Context?* or one that treats the relationship between the two models. Courses that introduce students to literary studies tend to focus on close reading and on theoretical approaches to literature, not on literary history. We all know that undergraduates resist historical requirements, and one of the reasons may be that we have never really explained or theorized those requirements for students. So instead of simply abandoning historical requirements in response to student pressure, we would be well advised to explain and explore them in engaging ways. (It would be ridiculous to think that students are incapable of enjoying the great historical questions of the discipline.)

### **English Undergraduate Enrollments**

Reconsidering the coherence of the curriculum is important for its own reasons, and sharpening our sense of the major might make it more attractive to undergraduates. But doing so will not suddenly open the floodgates to a tidal wave of new majors. Curricular change is only one of many strategies that departments might undertake.

Other approaches include:

- enhancing the [departmental website](#) so it becomes a more effective recruitment vehicle;
- studying the department's student cohort, including where new majors come from and when and why they enter or leave the program (one might discover new potential for attracting students from, say, community colleges);
- experimenting with nontraditional introductory courses;
- building the creative writing program or other writing programs;

- making new media study a visible part of the curriculum and underscoring the practical training it entails;
- building preprofessional course modules into the curriculum;
- and, not least, developing social media strategies that engage majoring students with each other and with the department.

We are seeing some success stories. The University of Pittsburgh has attracted interest with a revised curriculum that highlights students' interventions in literary works as a form of engagement. In the introductory course ENGLIT O505: How to Do Things With Literature I, for example, students might look at historical "things done" for different purposes to parts of Milton's *Paradise Lost* -- such as modernizing its language and syntax, or removing punctuation and line breaks, or finding a poem inside the poem -- and then emulate those models or invent their own. Such "revisions," says the course website, "help to highlight what is distinctive, valuable, problematic, puzzling, challenging and/or peculiar" in *Paradise Lost*.

The English department at the University of Denver has more majors than it can handle; some of that success may have to do with simple elements such as its course descriptions. Consider one brilliantly described early-modern topics course that has students working with quill pens and studying Chaucer's attention to birds. (Students may also do field study.) The course fills immediately and draws a waiting list a mile long.

Likewise, departments that have used their websites to showcase the major's attractiveness in catchy, even idealistic, ways have not lost as great a percentage of majors, it seemed to the committee, as have some comparable units. And the English department at Ball State University has completely rebuilt its number of majors, after substantial losses, by combining close attention to the undergraduate experience with an innovative and systematic use of social media. The English department is one of the intellectual fulcrums of the university. The curriculum has conceptual problems, but ones that are interesting and that may identify new ways to engage students. And techniques exist for enlarging enrollments, with success stories that validate them. Programs also have strong support from MLA and the Association of Departments of English, which is launching a consulting service for departments.

So English faculty, take heart. We can do much to shape our future.

[http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2019/01/03/examination-strengths-and-weaknesses-english-major-opinion?utm\\_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm\\_campaign=05ec395b2d-WNU\\_COPY\\_01&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_1fcbc04421-05ec395b2d-199133009&mc\\_cid=05ec395b2d&mc\\_eid=6f67a838c9](http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2019/01/03/examination-strengths-and-weaknesses-english-major-opinion?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=05ec395b2d-WNU_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1fcbc04421-05ec395b2d-199133009&mc_cid=05ec395b2d&mc_eid=6f67a838c9)